

Study finds married couples now less likely to uproot wives' careers in favor of husbands'

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The long-standing expectation that a husband is the sole breadwinner of a household has shifted dramatically during the last few decades, with married couples enjoying a more egalitarian flexibility in their roles.

But a new study reveals that American couples are now less likely to uproot wives' careers in favor of husbands' careers than ever before.

"While the decline in internal regional migration is not new, we show the decline is accelerated among co-breadwinner couples," said ChangHwan Kim, professor of sociology at the University of Kansas.

Kim and co-writer Matt Erickson's article, titled "Tied Staying on the Rise? Declining Migration among Co-Breadwinner Couples in the United States, 1990s to 2010s," establishes that couples for whom a husband and wife contribute equally to [family income](#) have become increasingly less likely to move to other states or counties, compared to male sole breadwinner couples. The article appears in *Social Forces*.

"When people are thinking about things like moving for new job opportunities and the role that plays in the economy, they think of it more in terms of individuals moving toward economic opportunity," said Erickson, the Dean's Doctoral Fellow in the KU sociology department and lead author of the paper. "They don't think about how most people are actually in a family context where there might be a whole additional [career](#) to consider."

The societal assumption for most of the 20th century was that the man represented the household breadwinner. But this has been incrementally replaced by the concept of "tied stayers," who are defined as individuals likely to migrate if single but instead stay in place because of family considerations.

Erickson said, "In the past, when a dual-earner [couple](#) would move, they might have put more weight on the man's career. They would have been willing to move for a new job opportunity for the man, even if it would hurt the woman's career. Whereas now they weigh both of these considerations more evenly, and they might forego an opportunity for

the man out of concern for disrupting the woman's career."

Kim and Erickson used publicly available data from the Current Population Survey data—in particular an annual survey that collects information on whether families moved to a new household in the past year, and if that included a move to a new county or state. Next, a regression technique was employed to approximate the relationship between a couple's division of income and how likely they are to move to a new county or state within a given year.

The study estimates the decline in migration probability among dual-earner couples relative to male sole-breadwinner couples accounts for nearly one-third of the total migration decline among [married couples](#) (ages 25–39) between the 1990s and 2010s.

This research was prompted by Erickson's own personal experiences.

"I was a tied mover several times before I started grad school," he said. "I would tell people that I moved to Delaware, then Seattle, then back to Kansas City for my wife's job. When I would tell them about that, they would say, "Oh wow, you're such a nice husband!"

"I thought, "I probably wouldn't get that comment if I were a woman moving for her husband's career." It made me curious about the decision-making process between partners while balancing different careers and how that might affect their decisions of where to move."

Erickson is finishing his doctorate in sociology, where his research focuses on marriage and family, gender inequality and internal migration. Kim is now in his 14th year at KU, where his focus is on the labor market.

Another key takeaway from their "Tied Staying" research is the decline

in migration is not entirely an indication of problems in this labor market. The fact that people are bound to other partners who also have a career is something to consider.

"We can't just assume everyone can move to a new region that has better economic development," Erickson said. "We can't just assume everybody can uproot and head to these metropolitan areas with lots of tech jobs where the economic outlook is very different. When we have an economy with a lot of households that have two earners, it's a bit more complicated."

As Kim said, "Now, people often don't move because they want to take care of their partner's career."

More information: Matt Erickson et al, Tied Staying on the Rise? Declining Migration among Co-Breadwinner Couples in the United States, 1990s to 2010s, *Social Forces* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soab146](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab146)

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